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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SUVA 000471

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/03/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI PM SEEKS HELP FROM FRIENDLY FOREIGN
GOVERNMENTS

REF: A. SUVA 469

- [1](#)B. SUVA 466
- [1](#)C. SUVA 460 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In a meeting with selected diplomats on Nov. 3, Fiji PM Qarase thanked governments for publicly supporting Fiji's democratic system in recent days. He responded to complaints by Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama about controversial bills, stressed his "open door" to dialogue, and said he is flexible about RFMF participation in Fiji's National Security Council (NSC). Qarase described a variety of internal Fiji efforts to find a way out of the crisis. How might foreign governments help defuse the situation? Qarase and Pacific Island Forum (PIF) SecGen Urwin discussed invoking the region's Biketewa process. Qarase urged governments to hit the RFMF where it hurts by threatening/implementing restrictions on support for PKO, military aid, and senior-officer travel. He told the group that he used the talking points re military support during a phone conversation earlier in the p.m. with EAP A/S Hill and received a "very supportive" response. The Aussie said FM Downer has advocated such restrictions. We comment that, no doubt, Qarase was putting his own spin on history and the current crisis; but Bainimarama has consistently presumed the worst, and his barrage of public threats to remove the government are blatantly unconstitutional. Action request: we seek guidance on how to respond re Qarase's request for restrictions on the U.S.-RFMF military relationship. Per ref C, a particular issue will be whether to rescind Bainimarama's participation in PACOM's CHODS conference the week after next. End summary.

Thanks to foreign governments

[1](#)2. (C) Following on reftels, on the afternoon of Friday, Nov. 3, PM Qarase called in the Ambassadors/High Commissioners of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the UK, France, and the U.S., plus the representative of the EU and the Secretary General of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF). He began with "sincere thanks" for all those governments' and organizations' "strong expressions of support for elected government," democracy, and the rule of law in Fiji.

Police investigations v. Bainimarama

¶3. (C) Qarase said he met in the a.m. with Acting RFMF Commander Capt. (N) Teleni, who said there will be "no coup." Still, the PM observed, Commodore Bainimarama's "erratic behavior underlines a need to watch the situation carefully." Qarase noted that Fiji Police investigations against Bainimarama are under way on several fronts: for public outbursts aimed to force the government to resign; for manipulation of Fiji's President regarding an investigation about sackings of RFMF senior officers in 2003; for mismanagement of the RFMF's budgeted funds; and for the killing of mutiny soldiers who were taken from police custody in November 2000. Many of those investigations are long-standing, and til now Bainimarama has managed to frustrate them.

Controversial bills and the GCC

¶4. (C) The PM said the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) meeting he has called for next Thursday (Nov. 9) is a "good step." Under the Constitution, the GCC must be consulted on all matters seriously affecting the Fijian people, and Qarase reiterated that the parliamentary bills Bainimarama has complained about were all endorsed by the GCC before being tabled. On the two such bills currently before Parliament (relating to land issues), the RFMF has made submissions to sector committees, an appropriate role. However, Qarase argued, the RFMF has no other constitutional role in the making of laws.

A reformed reconciliation bill in the works

¶5. (C) On the Reconciliation, Truth and Unity Bill (RTUB), the third issue, Qarase noted the initial, controversial bill lapsed with the end of the previous Parliament and has not

SUVA 00000471 002 OF 004

yet been reintroduced. He said there have been "substantial changes" in the draft, including deletion of the "amnesty clause" and replacement with new language that would make much more transparent a current process that allows "immunity" for convicted prisoners under some circumstances. Another aspect of the bill would set up a permanent National Council for Reconciliation, a step that Qarase believes is much needed in Fiji and is non-controversial. Regarding "amnesty," Qarase said police investigations into illegal activities from 2000 are "almost completed," which may raise a question whether amnesty or immunity provisions are still live issues. Qarase said he does not expect the draft bill to reach Cabinet until late 2006 or early 2007.

VP, PM, Commander discussions

¶6. (C) Qarase recalled the tripartite discussions that commenced among the Vice President, the PM, and Bainimarama after tensions rose last January. While meetings between the VP and the Commander have continued, Qarase said Bainimarama "opted out" of direct discussion with the PM after only a couple sessions. Still, Qarase said he made clear at the time that his "door is always open." It is that assurance that lies behind his latest offer to resume dialogue.

RFMF participation in the NSC

¶7. (C) On Bainimarama's unhappiness in being excluded from National Security Council meetings, Qarase said the convention over the years had been for the Commander RFMF and Commissioner of Police to be invited. After the events of 2000 when Qarase had just become PM, he invited both security officials all the time. Their participation was useful. Later, when Bainimarama began threatening the government, Qarase stopped inviting him, since "the threat was actually coming from the Commander, after all." Still, Qarase said he can be flexible on that issue...if Bainimarama stops his threats.

Internal Fiji efforts to resolve the mess

18. (C) When we asked for comment about any ongoing efforts, beyond those mentioned, within Fiji to promote resolution of the current crisis, Qarase reiterated his willingness to engage in dialogue with Bainimarama and his invoking of the GCC which might cause the whole affair to "fade away." Qarase noted that the attempt to "discipline" Bainimarama (via Presidential suspension) "fell flat on our faces." Still, he is pursuing that avenue, since "there are grounds for it." Qarase also mentioned the possibility of "easing him out to a posting abroad." But rewarding the threats is not the ideal solution from the PM's point of view. Qarase stressed, "the Commander IS the problem," and he suggested "the rank and file (in the RFMF) are embarrassed." He said "over 90% of military personnel" voted SDL (Qarase's party) in the May elections, and the sentiment is "still there." Asked if the suspension order remains in effect, Qarase responded: "That's a good question." Asked about any recent dialogue with RFMF senior officers, Qarase said he has spoken only with Teleni, who indicated the RFMF is "receptive to dialogue when the Commander gets back."

Other Fiji political party responses

19. (C) The UK rep reported that he and his EU colleagues met with FLP leader Chaudhry today and urged a public statement in support of rule of law. (Note: Chaudhry just returned from a trip to China and has made no public comment in Fiji yet.) Chaudhry made no commitment but said he would discuss the issue with colleagues. Qarase noted that Opposition Leader Beddoes has made a variety of comments, though his most recent have been helpful. Asked about a series of National Alliance Party (NAP) news quotes supportive of Bainimarama, Qarase said "those are the people behind the Commander." (Note: The head of the NAP is former RFMF Commander Ratu Epeli Ganilau. The newly formed NAP did abysmally in the May elections, after styling itself as the multi-ethnic alternative.)

Invoking Biketewa?

110. (C) Qarase turned to overseas governments and measures he hopes they can endorse to help calm Fiji. He noted the

SUVA 00000471 003 OF 004

Pacific Island Forum's Biketewa Declaration (see ref B). Asked to comment, PIF SecGen Urwin stressed that any action would have to be at the initiative of the Fiji Government. A first step could be to convene a meeting of Forum Foreign Ministers. He said doing so quickly could offer "preemptive" value, and he suggested to hold such a meeting in Fiji. A briefing by the Fiji Government would be the first agenda item. Outcomes could be a request for expressions of concern and support, an affirmation of the importance of resolving Fiji's problem for the region as a whole, and a call on the Commander to abide by constitutional processes. The Australian, PNG, and New Zealand High Commissioners all said their Governments are positive about such a meeting. Qarase said he needs "a short while" to consider whether to invoke Biketewa.

Urging PKO, mil-aid, and travel restrictions on RFMF

111. (C) The PM urged foreign governments, if Bainimarama continues his threats: (1) to "make clear" the Army "can't believe participation in international peacekeeping operations (PKO) will be unaffected;" (2) to spell out to RFMF senior officers that another effect could be a "scale-down" or "seizure" of military aid; and (3) another effect could be a restriction on travel of senior RFMF officers to our countries. Australian High Commissioner Rawson responded that FM Downer has expressed support for such moves that would hurt the RFMF directly. PIF SecGen Urwin raised a concern about implications for RAMSI. Rawson suggested that RAMSI is "regional," not "international."

Paranoia within

¶12. (C) Qarase also asked the diplomats to only engage with the CEO of the PM's office, Jioji Kotobalavu, on any issues concerning the RFMF, and not to engage with the CEOs of Home Affairs or Foreign Affairs. (Note: both those CEOs have an RFMF background.) The UK, Australia, and U.S. noted that their DATTS undertake extensive contacts with RFMF officers and have even increased those efforts in recent days, including with reminders of the proper military role in a democracy. It appeared Qarase had no objection to that.

Phone call with A/S Hill "positive"

¶13. (C) Qarase confirmed that he and EAP A/S Hill had a phone conversation today. He told the group it was a very positive discussion in which the PM made the points (see para 11) about how foreign governments might assist. Qarase said A/S Hill was "very supportive" in response. Qarase said Canada's PM plans a phone call on Saturday.

Comment

¶14. (C) No doubt Qarase is putting his own spin on the current crisis. He deserves blame for coddling "Fijian nationalists" involved in the events of 2000, for introducing controversial bills like the RTUB without prior consultation, for sometimes poking his finger unnecessarily in military eyes, etc. That said, he did bring consideration of the first RTUB to a grinding halt when much public reaction was negative. It will be instructive to see what the new RTUB actually looks like and whether it really has removed the "amnesty" aspect. Qarase has also encouraged public debate on the land-use bills. And he did win free and fair elections, with Bainimarama and the RFMF actively campaigning against him, in May. In this morning's budget address to Parliament, the Finance Minister announced about a 10% increase in the RFMF's budget for 2007. The picture is mixed.

¶15. (C) Unfortunately, Commodore Bainimarama has consistently presumed the worst; and, of course, his vocal threats to remove the lawfully elected government if it does not accept his dictates are blatantly unconstitutional conduct for a military commander in Fiji. With Bainimarama's expected return to Fiji tomorrow (Nov. 4), the civil-military temperature may well rise even higher. Clearly Qarase has appreciated USG public statements of support for rule of law in Fiji, as he appreciated his phone call today with A/S Hill.

Action request

SUVA 00000471 004 OF 004

¶16. (C) We need guidance on how to respond to Qarase's requests (para 11) for foreign governments to threaten, and as necessary implement, restrictions on engagement with the RFMF. The RFMF is already well aware from Fiji's past coups that U.S. law would cut off military assistance. Threatening to act pre-coup in such ways would be new, attention-grabbing steps. Per Ref C, the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions have previously raised with us concern about the invitation Bainimarama has accepted to attend PACOM's CHODS conference in KL this month at USG expense. See Ref C para 11 for Embassy comments on the issue. We note that, after the May election, the Commodore stayed publicly quiet for four months, until the day after the Pacific Armies Management Seminar (PAMS) ended in Nadi. He can contain himself if properly motivated. Whether a broader travel restriction makes sense needs discussion. That would catch senior-officers' attention; but it would also rob the U.S. of opportunities to influence at schools and conferences. Such interactions have enhanced RFMF abilities to operate beside U.S. and coalition partners in PKO deployments. However, thus far in this crisis, it does not appear past educational

interactions of RFMF senior officers with U.S. institutions have succeeded at another important goal: respect for "rule of law."

¶17. (C) On threatening support re PKO, the most obvious USG bilateral focus would be MFO Sinai, where we finance Fiji's way. Pay grades higher than ours must consider whether the usefulness to USG interests of Fiji's participation in the MFO overrides our interest in attempting to deter RFMF destabilization at home. There is no doubt that all levels of the RFMF see PKO participation as very important professionally and financially. We know MFO HQ in Rome would want to be involved in that discussion. We note that the Fiji Government has under consideration participation in the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq (MNFI). We surmise from Qarase's meeting today that MNFI participation will not happen so long as Bainimarama is continuing his outbursts.
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